



*NCCD Center for
Girls and Young Women*

July 2009

Sexual Exploitation of Girls Position Statement

Girl Matters: A Voice for Hidden Victims

Naïve and vulnerable girls lured by slick-talking pimps are drugged, beaten and held hostage for sex. They are our children, and they are the latest casualties of human trafficking.

Ashley, barely 18, pleaded to the driver to let her go. Three older women, who had taken her from the streets, introduced her to the man she didn't realize was a pimp. Soon, he was beating her and threatening to kill her and her family if she didn't continue prostituting in the back seat of the car. Two weeks earlier, she had been sitting in English and math classes at Hilliard Darby High School. She left home after graduation to get out on her own and the first people she met lured her astray. And just that fast, Ashley was trapped in an ugly underworld with no clear escape. "I wanted out," she said. "But he told me they owned me now."

Gone is the girl in the senior-year photo with rose-colored skin, innocent smile and ambitious eyes. What's left is a pale, anguished woman with hardened eyes. Almost a year removed from life on the streets, Ashley's body is fragile. But what remains of her spirit fends off the demons when her mind wanders to the past.

Excerpt from Columbus Dispatch
A New Word for Prostitute: Victim
Alan Johnson & Mike Wagner
June 28, 2009

Statement of the Issue

Girls, many as young as 11-13 years old are victims in US commercial sex markets—pornography, stripping, escort services, and prostitution. They are forced into the sex trade against their will and subjected to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. The most common image of human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation is one of individuals being smuggled across foreign borders or children being abducted from Third World countries and being forced into slave labor. These egregious crimes are indeed happening and warrant immediate action. But another less known or misunderstood form of this heinous crime is the domestic commercial sexual exploitation of girls and young women throughout the United States. The NCCD Center for Girls and Young Women (The Center) is deeply concerned about the failures of our system to identify and protect these girls, letting them fall through the cracks and leaving them open to the false promises of a "better life."

Nature of the issue

There is a dearth of information regarding the magnitude of the sex trafficking problem

- It is estimated that 10-15% of children who live on the streets, including runaway and "throwaway" youth, are victims of sexual exploitation.
- From 1998 to 2004, there were almost 300,000 hotline calls regarding child sexual exploitation. For every case that is reported, numerous other cases remain undocumented.¹
- Limited access to hidden victims poses challenges to estimating the numbers of girls and young women that are affected. Victims often have fake identification and distrust/fear coming forward.

¹ National Institute of Justice (NIJ) (Dec 2007). *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: What do we know and What do we do about it?* Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, NIJ.

Girls' Fundamental Rights

- Fair and equitable treatment
- Freedom from violence and exploitation
- Be valued and respected by those who interact with them
- Be able to trust the system
- Have a system advocate

Justice for Girls: Blueprint for Action
Children's Campaign, Inc., 2009.

- Traffickers continuously look for new “recruits,” and victims often know the identities of other victims or have heard stories about them.
- Common locations where young girls are targeted include schools, malls, parks, shelters, group homes, and the internet. Pimps recruit girls into sex trafficking by posing as a boyfriend, caretaker, and protector.

Characteristics of victims

- The average age of entry into prostitution or the commercial sex industry in the US is 11-13 years old².
- Child sexual exploitation victims often reveal a continuum of abuse, frequently starting with abuse by a family member³.
- Families characterized by high levels of domestic violence, drug use, serious mental illness, and sexual promiscuity are particularly at risk. Victims of child prostitution may experience emotional and psychological trauma, physical abuse, and higher risks for sexually transmitted diseases.
- Trafficking victims share common characteristics that make them vulnerable to traffickers. They often come from countries or communities with high rates of crime, poverty, and corruption; lack opportunities for education; and lack family support (e.g., orphaned, runaway/thrown-away, homeless, family members collaborating with traffickers).

Girls are criminalized and labeled as prostitutes or delinquents

- Society typically views girls and young women engaging in prostitution as criminals, and not as victims.
- Juvenile justice systems treat girls arrested for prostitution as offenders instead of victims, and these cases are not treated as possible human trafficking cases.
- In some states, statutes require that girls be charged with prostitution.
- Arrests for prostitution make victims ineligible to access funding for victims of crime.
- Often, girls are housed in juvenile detention centers because there are no safe alternatives⁴.

Lack of services and prevention efforts

- Lack of awareness of sex trafficking, especially in rural and suburban areas puts girls and young women at greater risk.
- The most crucial service that is lacking is the existence of secure physical shelters and safe housing for victims.

² Shared Hope International (2006, pg. 13). *Report from the US Mid-term review on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in America*. Prepared by Shared Hope International. ECPAT-USA The Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. Available online at: http://www.sharedhope.org/images/US_MTR_of_CSEC.PDF

³ NIJ, 2007.

⁴ Shared Hope, 2006; p. 10.

- The justice system is ill-equipped to adequately intervene.
- There is a severe shortage of community-based medical, mental health, educational, and vocational programs designed to address the specific needs of girls.

The Center Perspective

As part of its mission to “ensure equitable, humane, and gender-appropriate responses to improve outcomes for girls and young women,” The Center recognizes the need for the following:



Teenage prostitutes: victims, not offenders

When a minor, with few visible choices, sells sex at the hands of an exploitative adult, it is generally a means of survival. The term “teenage prostitution” also overlooks the legal status of minors who have greater legal protections regarding sexual conduct because of their emotional and physical immaturity and the need to protect them from exploitative adults. Therefore, it is important that victims of child sexual exploitation are not mistaken for offenders. (NIJ, 2007; pg. 8)

More research is needed to better understand the life stories of victims of commercial sexual exploitation in an effort to better identify victims and break these trends. The underlying systemic issues such as poverty, histories of sexual abuse, and family dysfunction that lead to the commercial sexual exploitation of girl and young women stem from some of the same risk factors that place girls at risk of justice system involvement.

An increased awareness of the scope of the problem, the localities where the problem is pervasive, and the true needs of girls, all grounded in the personal experiences and recommendations from the girls themselves.

Gender-responsive prevention and interventions where girls are protected and feel safe. A continuum of services is needed to provide safe shelter and access to medical, mental health, educational, vocational, and legal resources.

Legislation is needed that does not criminalize victims for their behavior. Alternatives to arrest, detention, deportation, or incarceration must be a justice system priority for these girls.

Specialized training for law enforcement and social service agencies (e.g., runaway shelters, domestic violence shelters, community health clinics, churches). Training must highlight what to expect from these victims—including how to identify them, their unwillingness to accept assistance, their distrust, and their survival and coping mechanisms.

Funding for mental and physical health services for victims who have suffered traumatic experiences, sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, and who are at risk of sexually transmitted diseases and other health problems.

When victims of sex trafficking escape their exploiters, they often do not report their victimization to the police. Instead, they go to agencies serving domestic violence and sexual assault victims, community health clinics, homeless/runaway shelters, and groups

How to identify a potential victim, look for the following clues:*

Evidence of being controlled.

Evidence of inability to move or leave a job.

Bruises or other signs of physical abuse.

Fear or depression.

Not speaking on own behalf and/or non-English speaking.

No passport or other forms of identification or documentation.

Who encounters these hidden victims?**

Crisis hotlines and social workers

Community and faith-based organizations

Good samaritans/citizens

School personnel

Business owners

Postal workers and inspectors

*Zonta Club of Jacksonville
www.zontajacksonville.com

**Clawson, H. & Dutch, N. (2008)
Identifying Victims of Human Trafficking: Inherent Challenges and Promising Strategies from the Field. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services.

that assist immigrants of a particular ethnicity.⁵ Unfortunately, these frontline agencies do not have adequate resources and are not currently equipped to identify victims and provide safe placements. Urgent action is needed to appropriately support girls who have been victimized by trafficking. It is our position that we have a professional and ethical obligation to ensure that these girls are not overlooked, further victimized, and kept invisible.

By listening to the voices and life stories of girls, we can better understand how we can protect at-risk girls, serve victims, and develop systemic solutions to addressing their needs. It requires a comprehensive approach that involves extensive outreach, advocacy, training, specialized services, and our full commitment. The NCCD Center for Girls and Young Women supports the following components toward effectively addressing the issue:

- **Research/Investigation/Extensive Outreach** to uncover the extent of the problem and identify who and where the girls are.
- **A Girl-Led Think Tank** led by girls who have been victims to foster innovative thinking and create a multidisciplinary, multicultural dialogue that brings experts to the table in a pragmatic but far-reaching search for solutions.
- **A Blueprint for Action based on Think Tank** to include (a) prioritization of immediate and long term needs; (b) recommendations for services, programs, policies, and processes.
- **Legislation** to address the void in the continuum of services, including access and eligibility as well as the decriminalization of girls' behavior.
- **A Specialized Training Curriculum** to increase awareness and skills in early detection and appropriate intervention for frontline workers in homeless/runaway shelters, domestic violence shelters, juvenile justice agencies, and police departments.
- **Education for Potential Victims (at-risk girls)** by engaging girls who have been victims (from runaway shelters and other high-risk living environments) to develop peer trainings, pamphlets, public service announcements about the "tactics" used by recruiters, as well as ways to seek help—in the language and voice of the girls themselves.
- **A Public Information and Advocacy Campaign** to shape public awareness and attitudes and to mobilize local citizens to develop innovative community solutions.

⁵ NIJ, 2007.